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CALL (SOMEONE) ON THE CARPET

to confront or hold someone responsible for some misdeed

1. The student tried to make the teacher think that his report was original, but the teacher knew it wasn't, and *called him on the carpet*.
2. I got *called on the carpet* for being late again.

Synonyms: *rake (someone) over the coals*; *chew (someone) out*; *read (someone) the riot act*

This phrase originates from the military, where it used to be that only senior officers had carpet in their offices. To be *called on the carpet* meant that a lower-ranking soldier was brought into the senior's office to be formally reprimanded for an offense.

CALL (SOMEONE'S) BLUFF

to challenge someone to carry out a threat or prove the truth of a statement

1. I told my parents that I had gotten passing grades in all my classes, but they didn't believe me. They *called my bluff* and asked to see my report card.
2. The bank robber threatened to shoot the bank guard, but the guard *called the robber's bluff* by walking up to him and taking away his gun.

This idiom is based on the literal meaning of this phrase as used in card games such as poker. A player who is bluffing may pretend to have a winning hand when in fact he or she does not. To call one's bluff in poker is to challenge one to show his or her cards.

CALL A SPADE A SPADE

to speak plainly or call something by its right name, even if it is unpleasant

1. Some people say Ben is generous with his money, but I *call a spade a spade*. He's not generous, he's foolish.
2. It's polite of you to refer to them as "lively" children, but let's *call a spade a spade*. They are actually very naughty.

Antonym: *beat about/around the bush*

The expression is usually used when something is described more favorably than it deserves. *Call a spade a spade* is a request for a more realistic description. The phrase dates back to ancient Greece, where the words for "spade," "boat," and "bow!" were very similar; the original translation may have been 'call a boat a boat.'

CALL THE SHOTS

to be in control or to give orders

1. In this classroom, the teacher is in control. The teacher *calls the shots*, not the students.
2. The lawyer tried to take control of the courtroom, but the judge reminded him that it is the judge who *calls the shots*.

This idiom stems from use in sports that involve aiming. For example, in darts, the thrower might call out the exact spot he/she expects to hit on the target. *Calling the shots* well shows the player to be in control of the outcome.

CAN OF WORMS, OPEN A

a situation that contains many unexpected and unwanted problems and consequences

1. The company's management thought their new policy would increase employee productivity, but instead it *opened a whole new can of worms*.
2. His situation is completely messed up; it's a *can of worms* that I'm happy not to have to deal with.

Synonym: *Pandora's box, open a*

CARRY A TORCH (FOR SOMEONE)

to be in love with someone, usually someone who does not love in return

1. Why don't you find a new boyfriend? Don't spend your life *carrying a torch for someone* who doesn't love you anymore.
2. Sara will never remarry. She will always *carry a torch* for Henry.

The expression suggests that love is a flame in the heart.

CARRY THE BALL

to take on work or responsibility in order to keep a project moving forward

1. We need more people to help get this work done on time. Are you going to sit there and do nothing or are you going to help *carry the ball*?
2. The people in the office were sorry to see Amira leave the company. She was such a dependable worker and you could always count on her to *carry the ball*.

CAST PEARLS BEFORE SWINE

to offer something to someone who cannot appreciate it

1. Buying our son an expensive car would be *casting pearls before swine*. He would be just as happy with an old used car.
2. Taking your young children to Europe would be like *casting pearls before swine*—they are too young to appreciate it.

The expression originates from the Biblical Sermon on the Mount, in which he says "Do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot."

CATCH (SOMEONE) RED-HANDED [GET CAUGHT RED-HANDED]

to catch someone in the act of committing some offense

1. The little girl's mother *caught her red-handed* trying to steal cookies from the cookie jar.
2. The two men dropped the stolen goods when they heard the police car sirens. They didn't want to *get caught red-handed*.

Dating from the 15th century, this idiom is a reference to the notion of killers being caught with the blood of their victims on their hands. The meaning later expanded to being caught in the act of any kind of wrongdoing.

CATCH (SOMEONE'S) EYE

to attract someone's visual attention

1. I was walking past some stores when a beautiful red dress in one of the windows *caught my eye*.
2. When the girls met their mother in front of the post office, they could see her walking towards them in the crowd, but couldn't *catch her eye*.

CATCH (SOMEONE'S) FANCY

to appeal to someone

1. Daniel arrived at the party not expecting to have a good time, but he met someone there who *caught his fancy* and spent the entire evening talking to her.
2. Before you decide that you don't want anything for your birthday, let's go to the jewelry store. You might see something there that *catches your fancy*.

Compare to: *tickle (someone's) fancy*

CHANGE HORSES IN MIDSTREAM

to change plans or leaders in the middle of some action or event

1. The president told the people that if they wanted the country to continue to move forward, they should reelect him. He said that to elect his opponent would be like *changing horses in midstream*.
2. The chairman of the board died suddenly before he could complete his plans for the company. The stockholders were forced to *change horses in midstream* and elect someone new.

The expression connotes that trying to change horses in the middle of a stream is not a wise thing to do—it would be better to wait until one is on land.

CHANGE OF HEART

a reversal of attitude

1. Karen told her boss that she planned to leave the company, but after the boss offered her a pay raise, she had a *change of heart* and agreed to stay.
2. The girl's parents said no at first, but then they had a *change of heart* and let her go to the dance.

The expression is usually applied to an emotional attitude.

CHARMED LIFE, LEAD A

to be lucky or avoid danger

1. That boy *leads a charmed life*. He always manages to avoid getting into trouble.
2. Monica *leads a charmed life*—she'll never have to work a day in her life.

CHECKERED PAST

a personal history that includes both successes and failures, or ethical and unethical behavior

1. Larry has quite a *checkered past*, but things are getting better. He has a new job and is saving for a new apartment.
2. The personnel director of the company refused to consider Mr. Dupont's application for employment because of his *checkered past*.

The expression originates from the alternating black and white (opposite colors) of a checker board. It is generally used in a negative sense, focusing more on failures and unethical behavior than on successes and ethical behavior.

CHEW (SOMEONE) OUT [GET CHEWED OUT]

to scold someone harshly

1. When Peggy came home three hours late, her parents were very angry. They *chewed her out* and told her she was restricted for two weeks.
2. The newspaper boy *got chewed out* by Mrs. James when he ran through her flower garden.

Compare to: *read (someone) the riot act*; *rake (someone) over the coals*; *call (someone) on the carpet*; *give (someone) a piece of (one's) mind*

CHEW (SOMETHING) OVER

to think slowly and carefully about something

1. I know the idea doesn't seem appealing at first, but why don't you *chew it over* for a few days before you decide?
2. Janice is not sure she is going on vacation in August. She's *chewing it over*.

The idiom probably originates from another expression, *chew the cud*, referring to the fact that a cow chews slowly and regurgitates its food to chew it a second time.

CHICKEN

scared; frightened

1. When the boy wouldn't jump from the high diving board into the pool below, his older brother called him *chicken*.
2. Are you too *chicken* to play a trick on the teacher?

Compare to: *chicken out*

CHICKEN OUT

to become too frightened to do something; to lose one's nerve

1. The girls wanted to ask the movie star for his autograph, but they got scared and *chickened out*.
2. You said you wanted to try parachuting, so we came up in this airplane. The door is open and it's time to jump. Don't *chicken out* now.

Synonyms: *cold feet*

Compare to: *chicken*

CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK, A very much like one's parent(s)

1. The young man likes to do the same things his father does. He's a *chip off the old block*.
2. Now that Ralph has grown up, he and his father are as different as night and day. But when Ralph was younger, he was a *chip off the old block*.

Synonym: *spitting image*

The expression probably originates from the idea that a chip off a block of wood or stone, though smaller, has the same characteristics as the block itself. A *chip off the old block* usually refers to a likeness in character or personality.

CHIP ON (ONE'S) SHOULDER

a feeling of bitterness caused by a sense that one has been treated unfairly

1. I said good morning to Ed and he snapped back at me. He sure has a *chip on his shoulder* today.
2. Carl has a *chip on his shoulder* because he was passed over for promotion in favor of Maria, although he feels he was better qualified.

The sense of personal injustice is usually imagined. The expression originates from the custom of placing a chip on one's shoulder and daring another person to knock it off as a way of challenging someone to fight.

CLAM UP

to not say anything

1. The witness was ready to testify at the trial, but at the last minute she *clammed up* and wouldn't say a thing.
2. The boy's parents were sure he knew something about the theft at school, but when they asked him about it, he *clammed up*.

The expression suggests that one keeps one's mouth as tightly closed as a clamshell.

CLEAN SLATE [WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN]

a new beginning, usually achieved by removing any record of previous bad deeds (sentence 1) or debts (sentence 2)

1. The man had done some terrible things in the past, but he moved to a new town and changed his name. He was trying to make a new life with a *clean slate*.

2. If you pay me what you owe me, you'll have *wiped the slate clean*.

Synonym: *turn over a new leaf*

The expression originates from the idea of a slate, the forerunner to the blackboard, which can be wiped clean to allow for new writing.

CLEAN (SOMEONE) OUT

to take or steal everything someone has

1. The robbers broke into the bank at night and *cleaned the place out*.
2. We needed to go to the grocery store after the party. Our guests really *cleaned us out*!

This expression is sometimes used to describe stealing, but can also be used to describe legal situations where everything is taken.

CLEAR THE AIR

to resolve hidden resentment or uncover hidden thoughts

1. I must have done something to offend Louise—she's been so unfriendly to me. I told her I wanted to *clear the air*, but she just turned and walked away from me.
2. The boss called a meeting because there were lots of rumors flying around the office. He said he wanted to *clear the air*.

Synonym: *bury the hatchet*

The expression originates from the idea that when there is smoke or fog in the air, it is difficult to see.

CLIMB THE WALLS

to be uneasy or restless

1. Peter had been studying for more than ten hours, and he was beginning to have trouble concentrating on his books. He was starting to *climb the walls*.
2. That child's behavior is intolerable. If I'm around him for more than a few minutes, he has me *climbing the walls*.

Synonyms: *go bananas*

CLIMB/JUMP ON THE BANDWAGON

to join the crowd in following a popular position, cause, activity, or fashion

1. Susan was never one to follow the trends of the times just because everyone else did. You couldn't accuse her of *climbing on the bandwagon*.
2. The senator was a supporter of medical care for everyone in the country long before it became a popular cause. Now, however, everyone is *jumping on the bandwagon*.

The expression is often uncomplimentary. A person who is described as *climbing on the bandwagon* has not joined the crowd out of commitment, but out of peer pressure.

CLOSE SHAVE

a narrow escape

1. The driver was distracted for just a moment and nearly hit another car. He missed the other car, but it was a *close shave*.
2. The spy had a *close shave* when she was nearly caught in the military camp. She had to climb a tree just to stay hidden.

The expression probably originates from the idea that a man who shaves closely is narrowly escaping cutting his skin.

CLOSED-MINDED

unwilling to consider new ideas

1. I encourage you to try new things. Don't be so *closed-minded*!
2. Anyone who wants to make the world a better place will eventually have to contend with *closed-minded* people.

Antonym: (*keep an*) *open mind*

CLOWN AROUND

to act silly

1. The teacher asked the students to stop being silly. She told them to stop *clowning around*.
2. Jerry likes to *clown around* and is always playing practical jokes on everyone.

Compare to: *fool around*; *horse around*; *monkey around*

COCK-AND-BULL STORY

a story that is too unlikely to be believed

1. You want me to believe some *cock-and-bull story* that you're late getting home because you got lost and then ran out of gas?
2. The driver tried to explain his way out of getting a speeding ticket by inventing a *cock-and-bull story*.

Synonyms: *song and dance*; *snow job*

The expression originates from an English fable in which a cock and a bull had an unbelievable conversation.

COLD FEET

too scared to do something

1. Joel wanted to ask Mr. Lee for a pay raise, but when Joel saw him, he *got cold feet* and just said, "Good morning."
2. The soldier *got cold feet* when the pilot told him it was time to parachute out of the airplane.

Synonyms: *chicken out*; *have second thoughts*

COLD TURKEY

abruptly; not gradually

1. Harry decided to stop smoking cigarettes all at once. He decided to quit *cold turkey*.
2. Many doctors believe that if you want to give up using a drug, you can't do it gradually. You have to stop *cold turkey*.

This slang expression was originally used to describe a way of stopping the intake of addictive drugs, and is still used most often in reference to drugs, including cigarettes.

COME FULL CIRCLE

to return (figuratively) to a point where one has been before

1. Bruce practiced law in a small law firm, then taught law at a university, then gave up teaching and is practicing law again. He has *come full circle*.
2. We started with a small, two-bedroom house, but as the family grew, so did the size of the houses we moved into over the years. Now that the children are grown and have left home, we've *come full circle* and are moving back into a small house.

The expression suggests that in creating a full circle, one returns to the starting point.

COME HOME TO ROOST

to return to cause trouble

1. If you tell a lie, you may get caught up in it and find that it *comes home to roost*.
2. Dorothy is convinced that she is ill and dying because her unhealthy lifestyle has *come home to roost*.

The expression probably originates from the idea of a bird leaving and then returning to its roost, the perch on which a bird rests. It is usually used to refer to something bad happening to someone who has demonstrated some bad behavior in the past.

COME OFF IT!

a response to a statement that cannot be believed (sentence 1) or a behavior that must be stopped (sentence 2)

1. You expect me to believe that you don't know how that dent in the car fender got there? Oh, *come off it*!
2. First you ask for juice and then change your mind and say you want milk. I get it for you, and now you beg for water. *Come off it*!

The expression is always used as an expletive in the command form. It is very informal and would normally only be used by parents with their children, or between equals.

COME OUT OF (ONE'S) SHELL

to stop being shy

1. Is that Tom dancing with all the girls? He used to be so shy and look at him now! He certainly has *come out of his shell*.
2. Patty has been sitting on the couch by herself since she arrived. Why don't you go over and start a conversation with her? See if you can get her to *come out of her shell*.

The expression suggests that a person who is shy or quiet is like a turtle that retreated into its shell.

COME OUT SMELLING LIKE A ROSE

to avoid blame that one deserves; to seem innocent

1. Larry should have gotten into trouble for what he did, but he was lucky and *came out smelling like a rose*.
2. Everyone in the government is accusing everyone else of wrongdoing and corruption. No one is going to come out of this affair *smelling like a rose*.

COOK (SOMEONE'S) GOOSE

to ruin someone's plans

1. Lynn knew that she was going to be in trouble for coming home late again. She wouldn't be able to talk her way out of it this time; *her goose was cooked*.
2. The students had sneaked into the classroom to see if they could find a copy of the exam, but now they could hear the teacher coming down the hall toward the room. *Their goose was cooked*.

The expression is used when someone is about to be punished.

COOK UP

to invent or plan

1. When Paul's friends planned his surprise party, they had to *cook up* a good excuse to get him to the restaurant without his suspecting a thing.
2. The prison inmates *cooked up* a scheme to break out of jail.

The expression connotes scheming, but is not necessarily negative (such as in sentence one).

COOL (ONE'S) HEELS

to wait

1. The assistant had a 3 o'clock appointment with his boss, but the boss kept him *cooling his heels* in the outer office until well past 4:30.
2. I'm sorry I'm late getting home. The professor had me *cooling my heels* in his office while he was on the telephone.

The expression connotes some degree of annoyance and would usually be used in informal situations.

CORNERED

trapped with no means of escape

1. The dogs chased the rabbit into the barn. It was *cornered* where it could not escape until the dogs' owner called them away.
2. When the police followed the thief into the back of the market, the thief tried to open the back door but found it locked. The police called out to the thief, "Come out now. There's no way to escape. We've got you *cornered*."

Synonym: *back to the wall*

COST (SOMEONE) A MINT/ AN ARM AND A LEG

to cost a great deal of money

1. I really wanted that painting, but it *cost a mint*, so I decided not to buy it.
2. Sending my son to that college will *cost me an arm and a leg*, but it will be worth it.

Compare to: *pay through the nose*

The expression suggests that something costs all the money stored in a mint—a place where money is coined—or that something costs the same value as someone's arm and leg. Unlike *pay through the nose*, these two expressions are used for monetary payments only.

COUCH POTATO

a person who sits for long periods of time on the couch, usually eating snack foods and watching television

1. My boyfriend likes to sit around watching television all weekend. He's a *couch potato*.
2. Let's not sit around doing nothing. I don't want to become a *couch potato*.

The slang expression suggests that the person has acquired the shape of a potato because of lack of exercise and eating too much unhealthy food.

CREAM OF THE CROP

the best

1. The students in this math class are the best in the school. They are *the cream of the crop*.
2. That computer company never hires mediocre employees. It's such an outstanding company that they hire only *the cream of the crop*.

Synonym: *first-rate*

Antonym: *third-rate*

CROCODILE TEARS

false, exaggerated tears

1. I don't believe Tommy really hurt himself when he fell. I think he's crying *crocodile tears* just to get attention.
2. The little girl started to cry but you could tell she was watching everyone to see what kind of reaction she was getting. They were nothing but *crocodile tears*.

This expression comes from the ancient belief that crocodiles cry false tears to lure their prey.

CROSS (ONE'S) FINGERS

to hope for luck

1. I sure hope we haven't missed the plane. There isn't another one for a week. *Cross your fingers*.
2. We're hoping that the operation is a success. We *have our fingers crossed*.

CRY OVER SPILLED MILK

to be unhappy because of a past event that cannot be changed

1. There's no use worrying about a test you didn't pass. You can't make it up, so stop *crying over spilled milk*.
2. When Martin didn't get the job he wanted so badly, his father gave him good advice. He told him not to *cry over spilled milk* and that another, equally good job would come his way eventually.

Compare to: *eat (one's) heart out*

Whereas *cry over spilled milk* is to grieve over some event that has happened and cannot be changed, *eat one's heart out* is to grieve over an emotional situation that cannot be changed.

CRY/SAY UNCLE

to admit defeat

1. Larry and Nicholas were wrestling on the floor, and Larry pinned Nicholas down. When Nicholas was ready to admit defeat, he *cried uncle*.
2. Two children were fighting on the playground. The girl grabbed the boy by the hair. The girl told the boy that she wouldn't let him go until he *said uncle*. "Uncle, uncle!" cried the boy.

CRY WOLF

to raise a false alarm or exaggerate so often that one is no longer believed

1. Every Friday, that man comes in to the police station and says he thinks he has been robbed, but when we get to his house, there is never anything missing. I think he's just *crying wolf*. You can't believe him anymore.
2. Terry regularly lied to his mother, saying that his older brother hit him on the head. Terry did it so frequently that she stopped believing him and told him that one day he would be sorry that he had *cried wolf* so often.

The expression originates from one of Aesop's fables in which a young shepherd boy falsely alerts people that a wolf is attacking the sheep. At first, people respond to the boy's cries, but he cries "wolf" so many times just for fun that eventually they stop. When the wolf really does come and the boy cries "wolf," no one comes to his aid.

CUT AND DRIED

routine (sentence 1) or clear and unequivocal (sentence 2)

1. The boss said that there wouldn't be a problem with my getting a pay raise. I was long overdue for one, so the matter was *cut and dried*.
2. The case was *cut and dried*. It was clear to everyone that the man was guilty of the crime, and the best he could hope for was a short prison sentence.

CUT CORNERS

to do things poorly or incompletely in order to save money

1. It doesn't pay to *cut corners* by buying cheap tires for your car. You'll only have to buy new ones much sooner, and the cheap ones may cause you to have an accident.
2. Don't *cut any corners* when you write that report. Spend as much time as you need on it and do a good job. It will be important when the boss decides who gets the next promotion.

CUT OFF (ONE'S) NOSE TO SPITE (ONE'S) FACE

to injure oneself in the process of seeking revenge or attempting to punish someone

1. Sally was offended when she did not immediately receive an invitation to the party. When she got hers the next week, she refused to attend even though she really wanted to. She *cut off her nose to spite her face*.
2. When Philip looked at the first question on the test and knew he could not answer it, he became frustrated and refused to go on to the next question. He failed the test when he might have passed. *He cut off his nose to spite his face*.

CUT (SOMEONE) TO THE QUICK

to hurt or wound someone deeply

1. When Christina broke off their engagement, she hurt George's feelings terribly. She *cut him to the quick*.
2. I was very hurt when my son and daughter-in-law told me they wouldn't be spending Christmas with us this year. I was *cut to the quick*.

The expression suggests the idea of cutting live flesh (the *quick*).

CUT THE MUSTARD

to meet standards

1. The coach accepted 50 boys who wanted to play football. Before the regular season opened, however, he had to remove from the team those players who couldn't *cut the mustard*.
2. The captain of the ship was trying to assemble a sailing crew. He told all the men who applied that they would have to work long and hard hours, and that he would accept only those who could *cut the mustard*.

Synonyms: *make the grade; up to snuff*

Whereas *make the grade* and *up to snuff* can be used to describe both people and things, *cut the mustard* is only used with people.